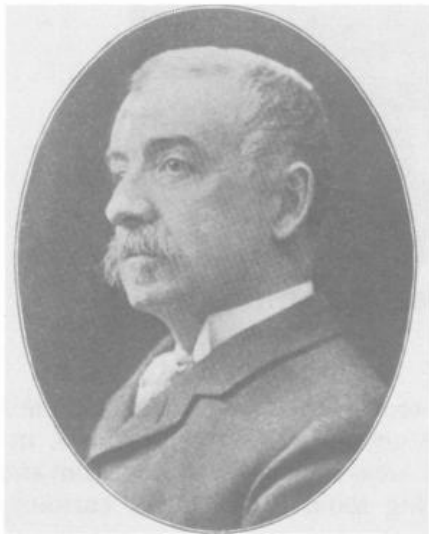


# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



**Bruce Price**  
1845-1903

In the history of late nineteenth century American architecture, Bruce Price stands out as one of a half dozen individuals whose work achieved special recognition for innovative floor plans and imaginative interpretations of historical styles. Although recognized by his contemporaries for the design of multi-storied office buildings and large residences, Price is remembered today chiefly for his summer houses in suburban New York and Maine.

Bruce Price acquired his architectural training in his native Maryland, working for the prominent Baltimore firm of Niernsee and Nielsen. After travelling abroad Price established his own practice, first in Baltimore and later in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, before permanently settling in New York City in 1877. As a member of New York society and a frequent summer visitor to Bar Harbor, Price was ideally situated to design his Maine commissions, a hotel and six cottages.<sup>1</sup>

Bar Harbor in the late 1870s was just beginning to develop as a popular resort for wealthy out-of-state "rusticators". These summer visitors built grand villas, called "cottages", in an area known for its natural beauty. Price's first work there, the West End Hotel of 1878-79, reflected the early and short-lived demand for large hotels in Bar Harbor.<sup>2</sup> Designed as an addition to an older mansard roof hotel on an urban lot, the project allowed little scope for imaginative site development (Figure 1). To provide distinguishing exterior ornament to what was a traditional large rectangular box, Price concentrated on the roof lines to achieve a picturesque effect. The high pitched hipped roofs with dormers of varied sizes and the over-hanging eaves supported on large brackets created an imposing and powerful composition. Below the eaves the walls were shingled and painted a contrasting color which visually continued the roof line of the adjoining older structure (Figure 2). The large veranda, a standard component for resort hotels, served to balance



Figure 1. The Bar Harbor waterfront showing The West End Hotel, c. 1880 view (Courtesy of James B. Vickery, Bangor).

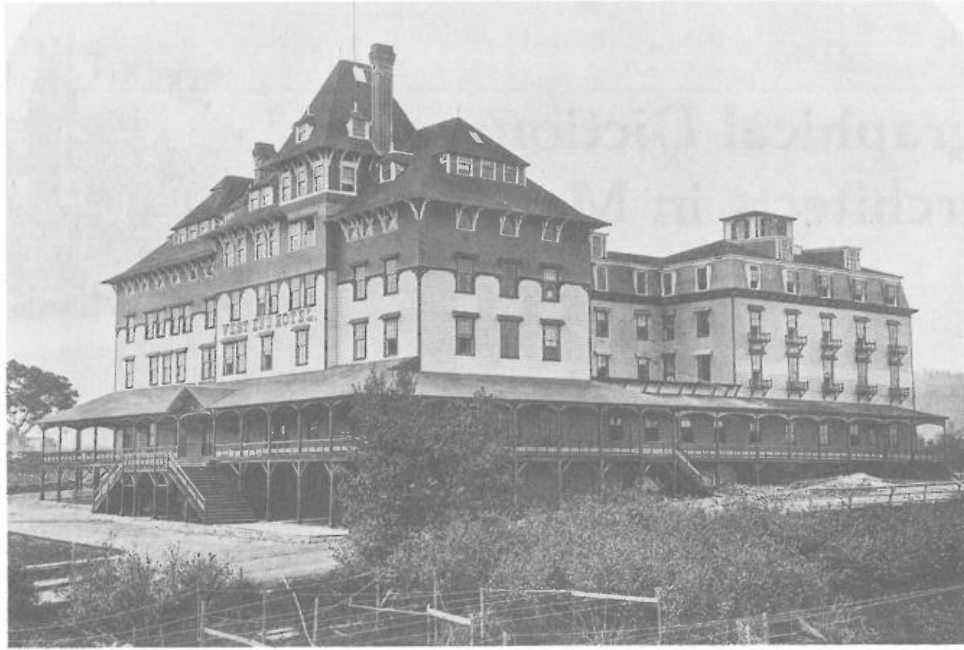


Figure 2. The West End Hotel, Bar Harbor, 1880 view (MHPC).

the vertical emphasis of the exterior, but in itself was restrained in the use of moldings and brackets.

In 1879 *The American Architect and Building News* published a perspective view of "The Craigs", a cottage by Bruce Price for Dr. Robert Amory (Figure 3)<sup>3</sup>. This was not built, and the house Amory did construct bears no resemblance to Price's scheme. No clear view has come to light of the constructed cottage, which was torn down in 1946. A distant view shows a shingled residence which was apparently by William Ralph Emerson, the Boston architect engaged by Mrs. John Amory to design "The Eyre" nearby in 1881.<sup>4</sup> Emerson's Single Style work dominated the architectural scene in Bar Harbor during the decade from 1879 to 1889. By 1890, however, the popularity of historical styles such as Queen Anne, French and Italian Renaissance, and Colonial Revival became the norm. Price's proposal for "The Craigs" is important in this context, for its Queen Anne style features such as half timbering, porch posts with heavy turnings, oriel windows, sun dials, and small paned lights were only beginning to find favor in Maine in 1879.

The design for "The Craigs" is especially significant for its imaginative integration of site, plan, and exterior trim. The unusual plan (Figure 3, insert), designed to conform to the variegated elevations of the rocky terrain, was carefully thought out so that the exterior asymmetry related to internal arrangements. The ground floor rooms were organized to radiate around a long central hall and were at different levels, according to how they related to each other and to the grounds of the estate. This effort resulted in balancing the various functions of the household. For example, the billiard room, a traditional male refuge, was located at the opposite end of the house from the music room, more generally occupied by female members of the

family. Moreover, the music room and the adjoining study were given the best scenic views. In between were family areas such as the dining room and the hall. The receiving room was located, curiously, in the tower.

The philosophy behind the design for "The Craigs" was articulated by Price in an article for *Scribner's Magazine* in 1890:

The ordinary older cottages, those of a quarter of a century ago, were generally planned with a single entrance facing the approach; this opened from a porch into a passage rather than a hall with the stairways starting a few paces within and running straight up against the side-wall to the floor above; the parlor and library to right and left, with the dining-room beyond the one and the kitchen beyond the other. Between the last two came the butlery and servants' stairs, and the back-door, which usually in the family life of the occupants became the thoroughfare to and from the house. This, pure and simple, was the general plan from which the house of to-day started. Step by step it developed. First the passage was attacked, and being broadened became a hall; the staircase fell away from near the threshold to a less obtrusive place, with landings and returns, and windows opening upon them. As the hall grew, the parlor, as its uses and purposes were more absorbed by the hall, became of less importance. The fireplace became a prominent feature, and placed in the hall and more elaborately treated, became an inglenook, with the mantel over it, forming an imposing chimney-piece. Improving thus its separate features upon the old, the newer plan advanced further in the disposition of these features. The new hall having become broad and ample, and the rendezvous and seat of the home life, took its position in the most desirable place in the advanced plan. The house grew up about it, following the other features and details in their proper sequence, until now, from the sum of all that has been done, the resulting general plan, with its controlling conditions of site, can be adduced. Resolving these conditions of site again into general conditions, the result of both is this: to plan and

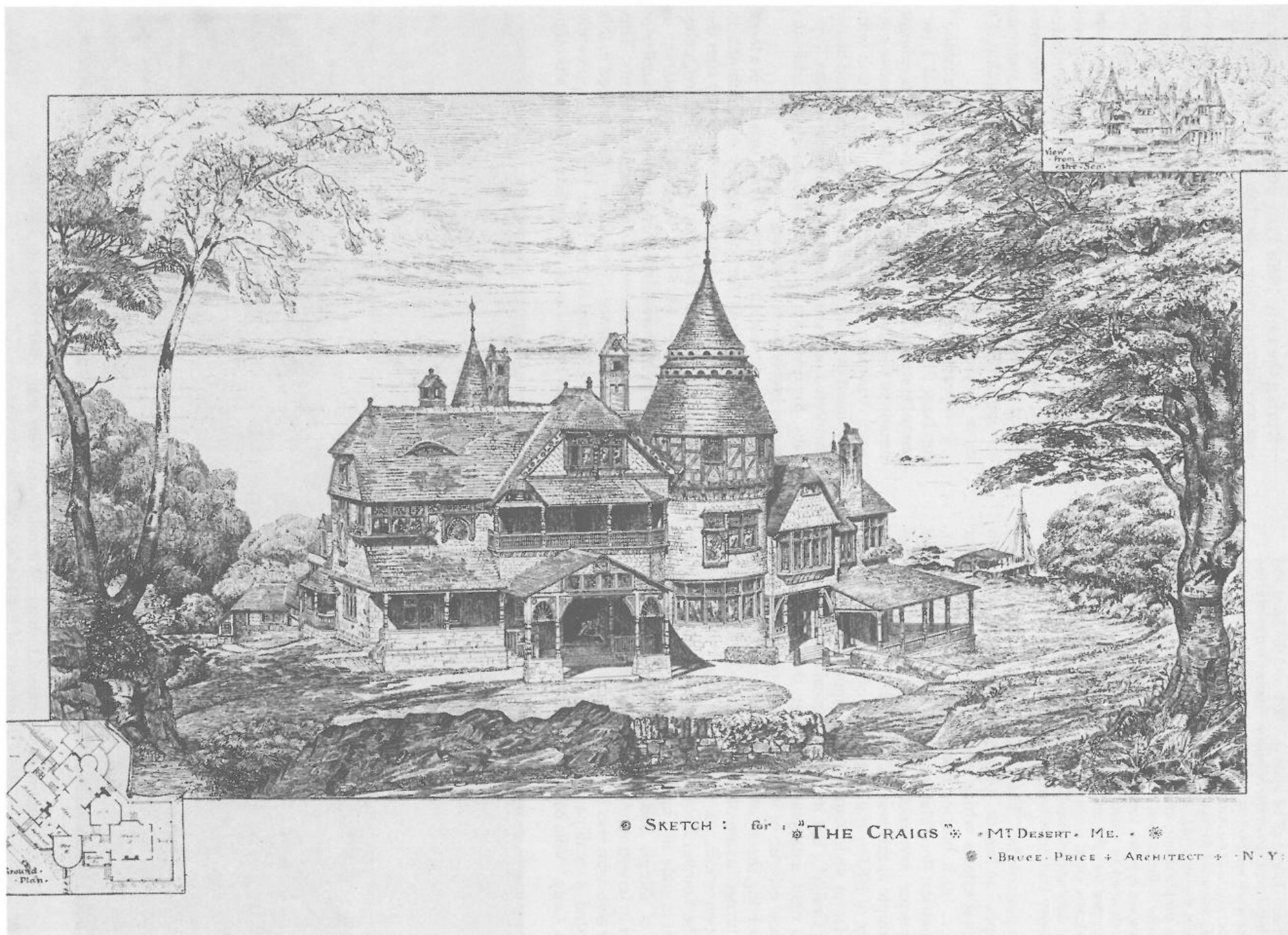


Figure 3. Sketch for The Craigs, *American Architect and Building News*, December 27, 1879 (SPNEA, Boston).



place the house upon its site so that the approach and entrance-door shall be upon one side and the lawn and living-rooms upon the opposite. Stating it directly, the best work enables us to approach by a drive upon one side, alight at an entrance-porch, enter by an entrance-hall, advance thence into the hall, and through it out upon the veranda, and so on upon the lawn. This is the simple result, and the reason is as simple. The entrance is for access; the hall, veranda, lawn, and the prospect beyond, belong to the private life of the house. Tradesmen or visitors, however welcome, cannot be dropped into the midst of the family group. Even the welcome guest wishes to cross the threshold and meet the outstretched hand and cordial greeting within. Even Liberty Hall must have its defence.<sup>5</sup>

The plan of the "The Craigs", which reflects these concepts, can best be appreciated by contrasting it with the great estates which were later constructed at Bar Harbor. Such houses frequently featured a formal, symmetrical floor plan that bore little relation to their picturesque, asymmetrical exteriors. An important early example of this was "Chatwold", the G. B. Bowler cottage of 1883 by the Boston firm of Rotch and Tilden. This Tudor style house bore a similar appearance to "The Craigs", but its asymmetrical exterior belied a rather rigid, axial plan. Moreover, the ornamentation was less eclectic in its use of historical sources.<sup>6</sup>

Receiving three cottage commissions in early 1880, Price turned his attention to a coastal site with relatively flat, open terrain. All three, "Villa Mary", "Witchcliff", and the Lombard cottage, were low-slung structures similar in scale and materials (Figure 4). With combinations of shingle and clapboard siding, these houses varied in fenestration and porch arrangements. Queen Anne style trim was kept to a minimum and generally consisted of small paned upper sash and turned porch posts. Only "Villa Mary" was somewhat picturesque

with its oddly-fashioned jerkin head roof corner tower.<sup>7</sup>

During the early 1880s Price designed a number of summer houses in the suburban New York development known as Tuxedo Park. This work is probably the most distinguished and original of the architect's career.<sup>8</sup> Price's 1882 Bar Harbor cottage for William Rice, "Casa Far Niente", is the only Maine project which was similar in spirit to his Tuxedo Park work (Figure 5). Designed in an L-shape almost entirely encircled by a veranda with square posts, the house was vertical in proportions with a square observation tower rising up through the center of the structure. Unfortunately, no record survives of the plan, but the location of the tower and the encircling veranda suggests an open informality characteristic of the architect's more playful compositions.

Two years later, in 1884, Price designed "Cleftstone" for Isaac How. Here the architect fashioned a rectangular structure which is rather severe in its exterior ornament (Figure 6). Sited on a hillside, the house suggests American seventeenth century inspiration with its framed overhang, diamond paned lights, and heavy chamfered posts supporting the entrance portico. Typically, the first floor had clapboard sheathing, while the upper levels were shingled.

Price's last work in Maine, "The Turrets", is a large stone cottage built for John Emery of Cincinnati in 1893-95 (Figure 7). Its design occurred shortly after the architect's Chateau Frontenac Hotel of 1892 in Quebec City and before his Place Vigor Railway Station of 1897-98 in Montreal. All three projects are similar in their use of Chateausque exterior treatments. This French Renaissance style had been popularized in this country by Richard Morris Hunt. Price was apparently as fond as Hunt was of this particular mode, although



Figure 4. Lombard Cottage, Witchcliff, and Villa Mary, Bar Harbor, c. 1885 view (Courtesy of Bar Harbor Historical Society).



Figure 5. Casa Far Niente, Bar Harbor, c. 1910 view (MHPC).



Figure 6. Cleftstone, Bar Harbor, c. 1900 view (Courtesy of Bar Harbor Historical Society).

he relied less heavily on intricate Renaissance ornament for effect and more on the choice of materials, siting, and massing. This is particularly evident with "The Turrets", which is built with quarry-faced granite blocks and is almost entirely lacking in exterior trim, the porte cochere being a singular exception. The texture of the masonry, combined with the picturesque use of dormers, corner towers, and variety of roof shapes, defines the character of this major work.

In the summer of 1894 the *Industrial Journal* of Bangor commented on the Emery mansion, then undergoing construction, by stating that it, "...promises to surpass in beauty all the cottages of Bar Harbor."<sup>9</sup> By then the resort community was experiencing changes both in the decline of the hotels and of increasingly grander residences being built there. "The Turrets" was part of this trend in larger-scale cottages based more directly on historical styles. Price himself expressed this change in 1887 when he wrote:

...the modest cottage built a few years ago to rough-it in through the hot days of the summer must be made a more hospitable home for to-day. It must be snug and comfortable, with broad hearthstones and warm walls for its tenants lingering on through the biting days of late autumn and early winter. It is the fashion to call these country houses cottages, but the cottages exist only in name. The cliffs of Newport, the rocks of Mt. Desert, the shores of Shrewsbury and the beaches of Westchester, Connecticut and Long Island have cottages that would be mansions in England, villas in Italy, or chateaus in France.<sup>10</sup>

Price continued to practice until 1903, when he died of stomach cancer in Europe, where he was seeking treatment. His death removed from the scene an architect who equalled in stature the leading practitioners of his day.

Roger G. Reed  
June, 1986



Figure 7. The Turrets, Bar Harbor, c. 1895 view (Courtesy of College of the Atlantic).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The only monograph on Bruce Price is an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "Bruce Price, American Architect, 1845-1903" by Samuel H. Graybill, Jr., Yale University, May, 1957. See also "A Critique of the Works of Bruce Price" by Russell Sturgis, *Architectural Record*, June, 1899, pp. 1-64.
- <sup>2</sup> G. W. Helfrich and Gladys O'Neil, *Lost Bar Harbor*, Camden: 1982, pp. 5-7, 88. The West End Hotel was torn down in 1900. A late 19th century addition altered much of the effect of Price's design.
- <sup>3</sup> *The American Architect and Building News*, Vol. 6, December 27, 1879, plate 209.
- <sup>4</sup> W. H. Sherman, *A Souvenir of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert Island, Maine*, Bar Harbor: n.d., n.p., c. 1900. For the Emerson connection, see the *Bar Harbor Record*, March 17, 1887, p. 2. The latter is also the source for several of the smaller Price commissions.
- <sup>5</sup> "The Suburban House", *Scribner's Magazine*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, July, 1890, reprinted in *Homes in City and Country*, New York, 1893, pp. 70-99.
- <sup>6</sup> A photograph and plan of the Bowler residence was published in *Artistic Country-Seats: Types of Recent American Villa and Cottage Architecture with Instances of Country Club-Houses* by George W. Sheldon, New York, 1886-87. Rotch and Tilden were Emerson's chief competitors in Bar Harbor during the 1880s.
- <sup>7</sup> "Villa Mary" still stands but was completely remodelled in the 1920s in the Colonial Revival style. A perspective view of "Witchcliff" was published as "Design for a Cottage at Mt. Desert, Maine", *American Architect and Building News*, Vol. 9, February 5, 1881, plate 267.
- <sup>8</sup> This suburban community was developed by Pierre Lorillard. Vincent Scully, Jr., in his book, *The Shingle Style*, New Haven: 1955, considered Price's work there to have been a point of departure for the residential designs of Frank Lloyd Wright.
- <sup>9</sup> *Industrial Journal*, Bangor, July 20, 1894, p. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> *A Large Country House*, New York: 1887.

## LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY BRUCE PRICE

West End Hotel, Bar Harbor, 1878-79, Destroyed.  
 The Craigs, Cottage for Robert Amory, Spring Street, Bar Harbor, 1879-80, Price's Design Not Executed.  
 Villa Mary, Cottage for F. H. Johnson, 77 Eden Street, Bar Harbor, 1880, Altered.  
 Cottage for Edith Lombard, Eden Street, Bar Harbor, 1880, Destroyed.  
 Witchcliff, Cottage for Mrs. A. F. Manning, Eden Street, Bar Harbor, 1880, Destroyed.  
 Casa Far Niente, Cottage for William Rice, West Street, Bar Harbor, 1882, Destroyed.  
 Clefstone, Cottage for Isaac How, Clefstone Road, Bar Harbor, 1884, Altered.  
 The Turrets, Cottage for John Emery, Eden Street, Bar Harbor, 1893-95, Extant.

Photograph of Bruce Price from *Notable New Yorkers*  
by Moses King, 1899.

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